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Washington, D.C. 20505

14 February 1979


ALERT MEMORANDUM

MEMORANDUM FOR: National Security Council

SUBJECT : Alert Memorandum -- China-Vietnam-USSR

The Chinese buildup along the Vietnamese border has grown unabated since our last Alert Memorandum of 19 January. We think that in military terms the Chinese are ready to go, and that their push, if it occurs, would be larger than we thought in mid-January. The political signals are mixed, but we think there is about a 60 percent chance that the Chinese will act. ☐

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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

National Intelligence Officers

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ALERT MEMORANDUM*

Since our alert memorandum of 19 January, the Chinese military buildup along the Vietnamese border has continued to escalate.

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At least 200,000 men are probably in the border area, and elements of two additional armies may be moving from central and eastern China to the military region adjacent to northeast Vietnam. There are more than 600 combat aircraft at bases close to Vietnam, with others in close reserve.

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We lack precise evidence on Chinese stockpiles, but trains have evidently moved large quantities of supplies and munitions toward the border. We continue to believe that from a military viewpoint the Chinese could attack at any time. Moreover, with the return of Vice Premier (and Chief of Staff) Deng Xiaoping to China, some political restraints deriving from his presence in the United States and Japan have now been removed.

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There remain political, economic and military arguments against an attack. The Chinese must consider US and Japanese advice to exercise restraint, possible Soviet reaction, the demonstrated ability of the Pol Pot forces

**The Alert Memorandum is an interagency publication issued by the Director of Central Intelligence on behalf of the Intelligence Community. Its purpose is to ensure that senior policymakers are aware of the serious implications for US interests of impending potential developments. It is not a prediction that these developments will occur. This memorandum has been coordinated at the working level by CIA, DIA, NSA, and State/INR.*

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to bleed Vietnam in Kampuchea without direct Chinese intervention, as well as the impact of major fighting on Beijing's cherished modernization campaign. Moreover, Chinese forces have not engaged in extended combat since 1953, and may not be fully efficient. In the past week, a number of Chinese officials have adduced some of these factors as reasons for China not to strike against Vietnam, and some of these officials appeared to be speaking on foreign ministry guidance. Nevertheless, Deng Xiaoping himself has repeatedly stated in public and in private that Vietnam must be "taught a lesson," and this theme was echoed in a Chinese response to a US demarche in Beijing on 10 February which cautioned against Chinese military action. We do not have direct evidence of a Chinese decision to move, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] On balance we believe there is about a 60 percent chance that the Chinese will in fact attack in response to real or contrived provocation. [REDACTED]

The size of the buildup on the border suggests if the Chinese attack it would be on a scope larger than we had originally thought likely--a brief and shallow incursion. The Chinese have a wide range of options open to them, beginning with a limited cross-border attack designed to inflict heavy casualties on Vietnamese border defense forces. One likely option would be to rout the border forces and drive far enough into Vietnam to threaten but not actually attack Hanoi, with a view to withdrawal after several weeks. We cannot exclude an attack on the capital itself, but we think this unlikely for both political and military reasons (the Chinese probably could not achieve air superiority in the vicinity of Hanoi). [REDACTED]

A major index of the seriousness with which the Chinese appear to be considering an attack on Vietnam is their defensive measures near the Soviet border.

[REDACTED] More significant are Chinese actions in the vulnerable northwest province of Xinjiang, where defensive

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trenching and an apparent large-scale civilian evacuation is under way in anticipation of a possible Soviet attack. [REDACTED] perhaps a million civilians would be evacuated--a massive, complicated and extremely expensive undertaking. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets in turn have stepped up their reconnaissance [REDACTED] deployed in the South China Sea but have not undertaken any detectable military moves of their own. They maintain sufficient forces in the border area, however, to undertake a considerable number of moves with little or no warning. [REDACTED]

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We continue to believe that the eventual Soviet choice in reacting to any Chinese attack on Vietnam will be contingent on the extent and severity of the Chinese action and its political effects. In response to relatively small-scale and shallow Chinese attacks, the Soviets are likely to restrict their active response to Vietnam proper, consulting under the Treaty, making conspicuous deliveries of military assistance, and probably issuing strong warnings. Against Chinese attacks in the middle range--which went so far as to begin to threaten Hanoi--the Soviets would increase their aid in Vietnam but might in addition mount military demonstrations on the Sino-Soviet border, seize islands in the border rivers, or even make quick small raids across the frontier, all of which they could do without reinforcements. [REDACTED]

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A severe dilemma would confront them in the event of a massive, direct Chinese attack on Hanoi, the least likely Chinese option. Against such a contingency, the above Soviet measures would not relieve the postulated threat to Vietnam, and would be perceived by world opinion as a Soviet failure of nerve. Even in these extreme circumstances, the Soviets would wish to avoid large-scale cross-border ground operations to any substantial depth that would risk enmeshing the USSR in protracting fighting inside China, and might instead consider air attacks. [REDACTED]

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In any event, the Soviets continue to be careful not to commit themselves in advance to any particular course of action. An authoritative Pravda article of 10 February on the Chinese buildup was notable for its failure to mention the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty or to allude to the possibility of a Soviet response if the Chinese attacked Vietnam. [REDACTED]

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